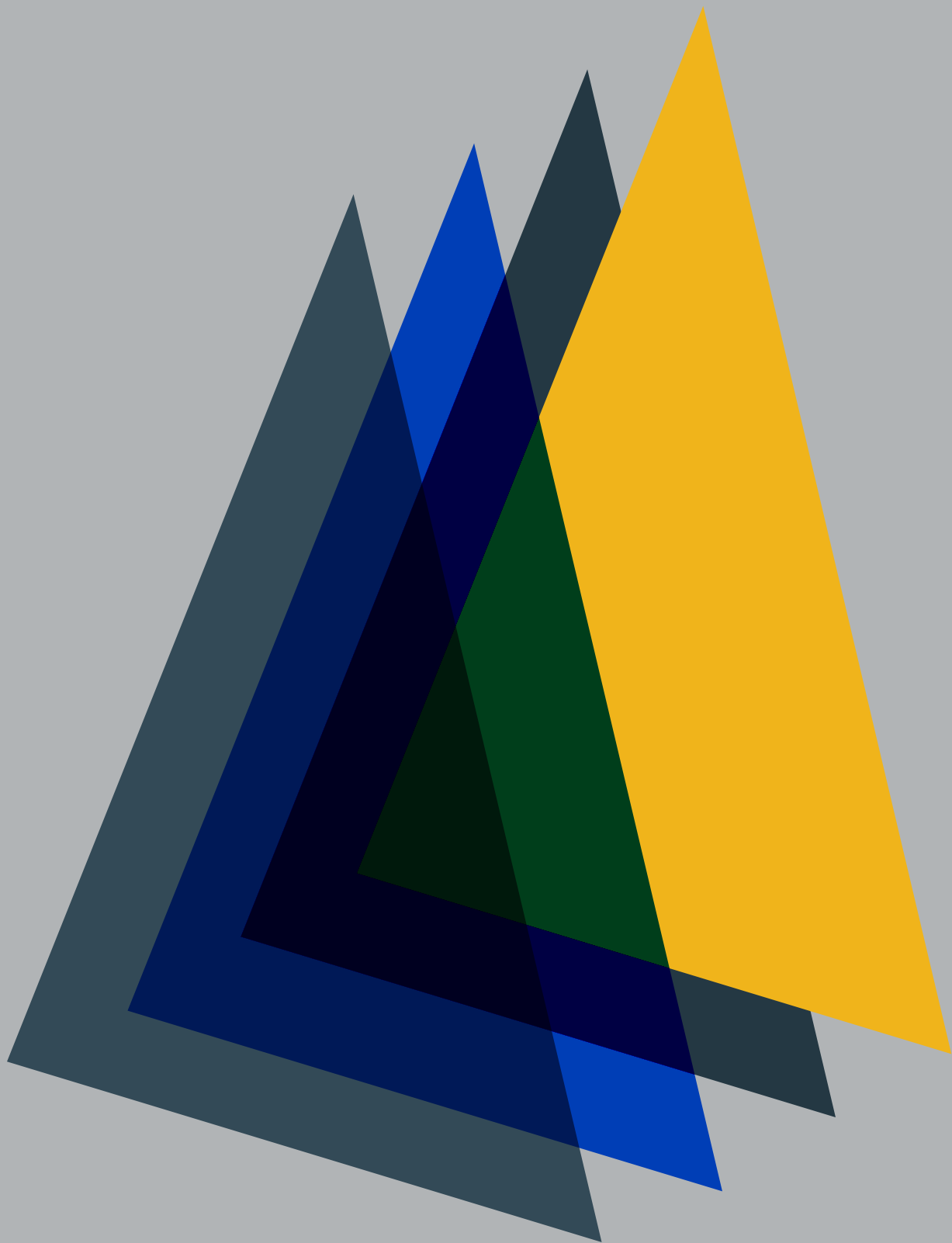


# BAD HISTORY 3/3

MARCH 2014









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snacks.*

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BAD HISTORY 3/3





# *Contents*



# link • [AGES]

Over the past two issues, KAPSULA has published several texts that dug into very specific histories—a paper reflecting on *the lost Seaview Trotting Park racetrack* and an essay detailing *Hamilton's Nine-Hour Pioneers* are just two examples. Within this installment the focus has changed. None of the essays in this issue address particular histories as their primary topic. Rather, and perhaps more appropriately, for the final installment of BAD HISTORY each text focuses on our methods of storing, describing and thinking through the past.

All accounts of history, good or bad, rely on links. They are forged from connections with the past, whether these come from archival information, documentation, oral accounts or the ever-pervasive conversation. (Ultimately, what is any link but a kind of conversation?) In this issue, the ubiquity of conversation as a source for historical accounts becomes apparent. The contributors ground their texts in dialogue.

Rosie Spooner interviews Louise Welsh and Jude Barber, founders of the Empire Café. This project will examine *Glasgow's connections with the Atlantic slave trade* during the twentieth installment of the Commonwealth Games, which will be taking place this summer. The project itself relies heavily on linkages and conversations—the wide-ranging programming includes a speaker series, commissioned poems and poetry readings, workshops and a literal café space. The very basis of the project is grounded in conversation, and the organizers have conceptualized the programming as a site for discussion, camaraderie and social connection. (Throughout the

interview the word “conversation” is used six times; “dialogue” is used three times; and the word “discussion” five.) But Welsh and Barber’s answers point to a primary aspect of all conversations: their unpredictability.

Meanwhile, for Alexandra Hammond, connection to another era shifts forward slightly—rather than linking past and present, Hammond’s text and artwork merges present with future. Playfully skewering obsessions with our “future selves,” Hammond’s piece assembles a series of notes which intertwines observations about Silicon Valley culture and questions about art’s role within a society where perpetual forward motion becomes more and more pronounced. Can we link past and present, or present and future, in a more meaningful, productive manner than the empty promises of cooking classes or iPhone apps? Conversation, and links more generally, vacillate between the vapid and the revelatory.

For Carlos Granados-Ocon, the role of conversation is integral to his work as an archivist. In his piece, Granados-Ocon traces the history of assertions that archivists should be neutral and objective. Pointing to the recent critiques of this position, he suggests that the best hopes for the archival profession lie in Internet-based platforms that allow for the collaborative construction of archives. In this sense, archives, and the histories they represent, become an opportunity for conversation and negotiation.

In many ways, conversation seems to be one of the most porous, undependable forms of historic fact. But this month’s contributors suggest that, while these moments of dialogue may be unpredictable or unwieldy, there is a power in this fragility.

The KAPSULA Team,  
Caoimhe, Yoli, Lindsay & Zach











# SPORT SLAVERY & SILENCES

*The Commonwealth Games gets an Empire Café*

ROSIE SPOONER

This summer the city of Glasgow will host the twentieth installment of the Commonwealth Games. Working within the now ubiquitous model of twinning sport and culture—a relationship played out in Vancouver and London, and being planned for Toronto’s hosting of the Pan Am Games—Culture 2014 is a nationwide programme of cultural events. One of the projects selected for inclusion, and scheduled to take place during the Games themselves, is the Empire Café, an inter-disciplinary and collaborative project organized by Jude Barber, an architect with *Collective Architecture*, and *Louise Welsh*, a Glasgow-based writer and author. Last month I met Jude and Louise at the Briggait, the building that will house the Empire Café for a week in July and August, and sat down with them to discuss the project.

In working with artists, writers, playwrights, academics, social advocates and community groups from Glasgow as well as further afield, Jude and Louise have positioned the Empire Café as a platform for “looking at history through different filters.” The project involves a number of practitioners including the artist Graham

Fagen, curator Richard Benjamin, authors Chris Dollan and James Robertson, and academics David Archibald, Graham Campbell and Stephen Mullen. The history of Glasgow’s connections with the Atlantic slave trade, the object of their focus, is an inherently and infinitely complex subject, and one that takes on added significance when attentions and emotions are focused on the upcoming referendum on Scottish independence. Although unquestionably about Scotland’s future, the vote also concerns the history behind its relationship with England, and by extension the workings of the former empire both were agents of. Over the course of our conversation, a selection of which follows, we talked about the at-times forced bonds between art, sport and commerce, and the role all three have played in mediating evolving colonial and postcolonial relationships. The project is ambitious in scope, in terms of the range and number of events the Empire Café will host, and with regards to the idealistic hopes Jude and Louise have for the project’s impact. The duo betray an awareness of these issues however, and seem to be building the project in part through a—some might say characteristically Scottish combination—of impassioned curiosity and self-deprecating drive.





### *Rosie Spooner*

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I initially became interested in the Empire Café because it seems to want to engage with problematic histories, particularly postcolonial histories, through a range of creative mediums. As an art historian, I'm drawn to the project for the way it's trying to interrogate difficult histories through contemporary practices.

### *Louise Welsh*

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It sounds kind of zeitgeist-y. You think you're doing something solo, but actually there's so much coming together at the same time.

### *Jude Barber*

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I think we got here at the right time. It's the right time to talk about this particular period in Scotland's history. It feels comfortable to talk about uncomfortable subjects.

**RS** So as a starting point, perhaps I could ask you to introduce the Empire Café project, and discuss how it has come together and been formalized?

**LW** Jude and I had worked previously on a series of sound projects, *Merchant City Voices*, which explored Glasgow's relationship with the North Atlantic slave trade. We were coming from a point of knowing rather little, but wanted to look at the complexity of that relationship in terms of the way the city profited, particularly with respect to the histories of the buildings that exist in Glasgow largely because of that wealth. But also we wanted to think about the enslaved peoples who were not passive victims, but were people who often fought

hard and strongly against the slave trade. That project was part of the genesis, and then Jude heard about the call. And it was really you who had the idea for a café.

**JB** It was a conversation between us really. We saw the call for the *Culture Programme* for the Commonwealth Games, and we felt that after finishing the Merchant City Voices project we'd only started to get a sense of the subject. As a place where there was going to be this major cultural festival it felt amiss that there wasn't something addressing Scotland's relationship with the broader Commonwealth through trade, so when we sat down to talk about ideas we were thinking about produce, peoples and place. One of the things that struck us was the idea of a tearoom, which we think of as quintessentially British, but which when broken down into its constituent parts—tea, sugar and historically tobacco—is actually an international concept. To create a place, a tearoom, where people would be invited in to talk about this subject matter—or choose not to talk about it, but be aware of it—was something we were very keen to do. So it started with the notion of a tearoom. Since being selected for the Cultural Programme, however, the project has really grown partly because we have realized there's been a breadth of work carried out on the subject already. So I suppose what we're doing is bringing all that work together into one place, and all those people into one place for a week to talk about it.

The project has developed various strands. There's the poetry anthology for which we're commissioning twenty poems, ten from Caribbean writers and ten from Scotland-based writers. There's the café itself which has a food and outreach program associated with it, through which we'll be working with various community groups. And then there are the events.



**LW** Most of which are free. Things like the Commonwealth Games cost a lot of money for people to go to. We're organizing a couple of the events in tandem with other organizations who have to charge, but everything we're doing solo is free. The idea is that you don't have to buy a cup of coffee to come in and be a part of it. We want to invite academics, we want to invite artists and writers, we want to invite people who don't know anything about the subject. We want conversations to begin in the café and then carry on during the walk home.

**JB** One of the things we're doing over the next wee while is thinking about how to bring all that into a formula that's clear and legible for people.

**LW** And make sure we get audiences as well.

**RS** Yes, how are you going to gather together and integrate the different components?

**JB** We're hoping to structure it so that the café will open in the late-morning. There will be smaller lunchtime events and workshops in the afternoon, then the evening will have the key speaker events. This allows us to see the day in three clear parts, which then repeats for seven days. What started with the idea of a small tearoom, maybe with some poetry readings, has grown really due to the generosity of Wasps Studios who manage the Brigait, and who have let us have the freedom to think about how we might use the space.

I suppose we haven't talked about how important this building is in the sense that it was originally a tobacco merchant's house, and more recently been the former fish market. Being located immediately on the water, on the Clyde, and with a Grade-A

listed façade means there is a *gravitas* to the building itself, which is rooted in the subject. It's also on one of the key walking routes of the Commonwealth Games since it's in between the two major sporting venues. There's something quite nice about how, on this promenade between sporting events, there's an opportunity to come in to this space, and get to the heart of the matter in terms of the Games and its origins.

**RS** I'd like to pick up on the connections between sport and slavery since the relationship between the Commonwealth Games and the Atlantic slave trade are not immediately apparent. Why do you feel the Commonwealth Games is an appropriate occasion to have a discussion about Glasgow's ties to the slave trade?

**LW** In many ways it's because the money was available. We probably would have put an application in to any big event that had a constellation of other cultural events around it, but it's especially fortuitous because the Commonwealth Games used to be the Empire Games. We see it from our perspective, but I think increasingly in Scotland there's an uncomfortableness with the idea of Commonwealth. I don't know how countries within the Commonwealth feel—maybe they're quite happy about it—but I guess because of the relationship between Commonwealth and empire and our role in empire, which is not always one to be proud of, there's that uncomfortableness with the association of exploitation and so the two do fit.

**JB** I can understand the benefit international sporting can bring, but it's important a cultural programme sits alongside any major event, and offers to look at it through a different filter. It's easy to get swept along in the mass celebration of sporting excellence, or commercialism or whatever it is that will sweep you along, so there should be a place to have a moment where you



do actually take stock through something that's free, accessible, thoughtful and mindful. We're hoping this will become a place of discussion, debate and dialogue, as well as warmth and conviviality. We don't really know exactly what's going to happen, but in a way what is good about being involved in arts and culture is that you're used to that, whereas if you're involved in sport and the delivery of commercial events you don't want surprises. We want there to be an element of uncertainty, and engagement we're not entirely in control of.

**RS** Do you see there being potential challenges with regards to creating a space that will hopefully foster dialogue and critical discussion, while at the same time being part of a cultural programme that is officially connected to a major international sporting event?

**JD** Do we see any contradictions there?

**RS** Yes. Do you feel that presents challenges? Or maybe those are issues to play off of?

**LW** We have complete artistic freedom and that would be the deal breaker. There are no restrictions in that sense. But I guess we're working with the British Council as well, which has its own histories, so we're working with organizations that some artists would choose not to work with. But that's a decision you make.

**JB** We had to make a judgment. We are doing an event about Scotland and North Atlantic trading and were given the opportunity through the British Council to bring artists over to give their perspective on that. But if someone had said "you have to do x, y, z" it would have been different. It suited what we are trying to do. I think Louise is right, we've been very fortunate with the people we've been dealing with through the Cultural Programme in terms of their openness. They've seen the things were

hoping to do, they've seen the types of events, they know who's coming, and they're not making any...

**LW** ... They don't seem to be scared.

**JB** By commissioning us they knew it was never going to be just good stories. That was something we highlighted in our application. This is not a topic people have historically wanted to hear about but there now seems to be an appetite to talk about it, and we owe it to people to talk about the subject—we owe it to ourselves—particularly at this time when Scotland is questioning how nations conduct themselves, and asking what kind of nation we want to be. Where the border ends up lying is not really part of this particular project, but to go forward you need to reconcile yourself with the past and have an understanding of your role at particular times in history.

**LW** Part of being a maturing nation is taking responsibility. To not view yourself as completely colonized, but to recognize we're colonizers as well, and look at the reasons for that. Why would somebody like Burns—a good socialist like Burns—think of going to the Caribbean and getting involved in the plantation system? What might have happened if he'd done it? We need to think about those alternative histories. He might have come back, as many people did, and become an abolitionist, or he might have got stuck in and made a lot of money. Who knows?

**RS** You have described the Empire Café as a way to explore Scotland's historic connections with the slave trade through tobacco, sugar, tea and cotton. Is it really possible to examine such a complex system through an exchange based on the serving of tea and cakes, as was suggested in an article recently published by The Herald newspaper?







**LW** I guess the message... Well I guess we don't really have a message. As Jude was saying we're more interested in dialogue, conversation. We have a great deal of faith in people's abilities to make connections themselves. We're not an educational project per se, but part of your job as a writer, an artist or an architect is to help people see familiar things in different ways. Things like tea and cake are such a part of our lives, part of our childhoods, so seeing them in a slightly different way can in and of itself be a realization of the project.

**JB** It's not as if there are going to be any clear answers—or even any clear questions—but we're bringing as many brilliant people as we know together, and bringing their incredible bodies of work together in one place and seeing what happens. It makes you realize how artists and writers can address these subjects in ways that history books might not, and connect with people in different ways. I don't know; we're not quite sure. Sometimes we're not quite sure what we're doing.

**LW** To put an artist together with a historian, together with a poet and just see what happens next. That's quite thrilling. But it's a bit scary because you're worried you're going to drop all the balls.

**RS** The question of audience is one you have alluded to. Who do you see as the project's main audiences, and how do you position that in relation to the official aim of the Culture 2014 Programme, which is to “enhance the experience of the Glasgow 2014 Commonwealth Games for Scotland's communities, spectators, and visitors”?

**JB** We're trying to think a bit beyond our comfort zones in terms of audiences. We know who is likely to come because of their interest in the subject, so it's trying to think beyond that to the broader community, nationally. The food program is working with seven different

community groups, one for each day, to produce and prepare food for the café. We're also hoping, although we're still in early discussions, to team up with one of the major Housing Associations who are already planning to bring people to the Games. We're hoping to link up with them, and issue the poetry anthology in advance along with a tea-for-two voucher. Those organizations have the funds to bring people in, something we don't have within our budget but which we really want to do. The question of audience requires thinking of the different ways you can bring people in. More city-based and younger people might be using the internet, but maybe at sheltered accommodation out in East Kilbride or Sighthill, it's through working with Housing Associations that you can get groups to come in for particular events.

**LW** We have also made a connection with Inverclyde Libraries who are located where the big sugar sheds were, where Tate & Lyle had their headquarters. The head of Inverclyde Libraries is arranging for reading groups to read Chris Dolan's *Redlegs*, and since Chris is doing an event with us and showing a film the reading groups will be helped with transport to come into Glasgow. There is also a visually impaired disability group I've worked with before, so when we firmed up the program I asked them whether there were any particular events they'd be interested in attending. We have also talked to smaller groups like the Association for Scottish Literary Studies and Scottish PEN who can't really give us much money, but can tell their networks. BBC Radio 4 is also commissioning a series of short stories from several of our poets and then organizing a live recording of them reading their stories in the café. Something like four million people hear those segments. They have an amazing reach. We're also hoping the proximity to the route between sporting venues will bring in people who might not have heard of the project. We want the accidental traveler as well. There's all sorts of things, but you're right that we need to work for audiences as well.



**RS** The name still reflects the original idea of there being a tangible, physical space although from how you have both discussed the project it sounds like the Empire Café has increasingly become more like a conceptual framework. What is the resonance of the name, and were you deliberately referencing any historical *precedents* or *paradigms*?

**LW** Definitely playing with them. If you google Empire Café you'll find cafés with that name all across Britain. There's an *Empire Bar* around the corner.

**JB** The name also doesn't need explaining very much. When we say to people that we're doing a project called the Empire Café, which explores Scotland's relationship with trans-Atlantic slavery, it immediately registers. The notion of going for tea, for cake, it's something everybody has done at some point in their life, so it's not unfamiliar territory in terms of what people might anticipate. When we were putting together the bid we weren't sure whether we would run it as a café, or whether it would be an exhibition built around the appearance of a café. We weren't clear about that ourselves but one thing we've always been clear on is that it should at least *feel* like a café. It was fundamental that visitors get the sounds and smells of the tea-room, because it creates a convivial environment. So in the end we made the decision to actually have a functioning café space.

**LW** And that's maybe the riskiest strategy because people really complain about their cups of tea!

**JB** It's such a national pursuit and people have strong opinions on it.

**LW** People could come in, they could have a free discussion from top international names, they could receive

a poetry anthology, they could hear music, see a couple of free films but if the cup of tea is sub-standard that's it. That idea of conviviality is an important one. It needs to be a place where anyone feels they can enter regardless of class, ethnicity, or anything like that. I think something that will come up over and over again is the issue of class. We're a very class-based society, increasingly so rather than less so, and that is partly due to our engagement with the slave trade. Not everyone benefited, although in many ways Scotland benefited hugely. We went from being what we'd call a 'developing nation' into a wealthy nation very, very quickly but it did not affect everybody in that way, and the level of privilege it entrenched is a blight on our society. I think that's something that will be discussed.

**RS** The notion of playing with the familiar to incorporate alternative narratives appears to be an important thread.

**JB** Yes. One of the things I've particularly enjoyed about the cross-disciplinary nature of this project, and others we've worked on together is that it takes you out of your comfort zone, out of your typical way of behaving, speaking or knowing. To be confronted by a poet—or someone you've never heard of but who is critically acclaimed within their field—and to hear them is a powerful experience. Everyone we have seen so far are people who are working at an incredibly high level, and yet are all very generous, engaging characters. When you actually see someone sharing their work, it's a true privilege. I think that even if you don't fully understand everything they're doing because you're not trained in that particular way, you can still understand their passion and their skill. And get a sense of their take on history or culture. I think that's what we're really hoping for; that there's a kind of power to the events, which you can't help but be impressed by.



**RS** Going a step further then, perhaps the concept of comfort and moving outside of what one is most comfortable with brings together the project's main themes. For myself, I see that as reflective of the way Scotland has dealt with—or not dealt with—it's connections with the slave trade. Why do you think there has not been an attempt to engage with this challenging history, particularly when other major port cities like Liverpool and Bristol have initiated public conversations about the subject? Why has there been a silence in Glasgow, and, more widely, Scotland?

**LW** Our historians, the ones we're working with, might answer that question with more expertise. I wonder if the history of Scotland has been subsumed by the history of the UK, which has to an extent let us off the hook. As a child in school I certainly did not get taught much Scottish history, which I think means there has been a lack of education. That's not enough of an excuse, however, because Scottish people are very good self-educators. That's a massive generalization of course, but there is a strong element of that within Scotland. I'm not sure why. Perhaps the way the trade happened here was also a factor. The triangular aspect of it means we do not really know how many slaves were physically brought here. It was easier to not see it because it wasn't around you. But, again, that's not an excuse.

**JB** I similarly do not know enough about it. However, there are parts of our history we're very happy to talk about like our industrial past, and our involvement in the textile and shipbuilding industries. Those activities benefitted society by creating sources of labour and wealth. Whether recognizing where those came from somehow diminishes its significance? Perhaps it's discomfoting to be critical of the origins of something you're quite proud of? But until we talk about that we cannot think about some of the issues in our current society, like our attitudes towards people from particular countries and those liv-

ing in our communities, people who have maybe lived in our communities for generations. Attitudes to those issues are inherently linked to an understanding, or lack of understanding, of our social and cultural history. There's a complexity to that question of silence.

**LW** It doesn't fit with our narrative that we're left wing, we're working class...

**JB** ...we were downtrodden, we were brought to battle.

**LW** The concept of slavery comes into Scottish literature and Scottish song but it is usually us. We're the ones who are enslaved. We don't think of ourselves as enslavers. We are not pointing the finger—it's part of our history, we're both from Glasgow—the project is saying we shouldn't be scared. We should recognize it.

**JB** The more you know, the more you can take an informed position relative to things that might be presented to you through the media, through education, through people you meet and the conversations you have. You can start to discuss issues from a more informed position. I feel a part of the early stages of that conversation, and we're hoping that by the end of August we'll have an even more enriched and nuanced understanding of the subject and then take it from there.

**LW** And then book a holiday.

**JB** To the Caribbean.

**LW** I guess this project is for us as much as anybody else really. We are the audience.

**JB** We're not experts, we're just finding our way.



## *Selected further reading*

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### *Rosie Spooner*

is a researcher and writer originally from Toronto, and currently undertaking Ph.D. studies in the Art History department at the University of Glasgow, Scotland. Her developing curatorial practice brings together historic and contemporary objects, artworks and exhibitionary models in an effort to re-frame these categories, issues which similarly underpin her academic research.



# *Notes from the Land Of the Perpetual Present*

ALEXANDRA HAMMOND

1

San Francisco, 2013.

A Wednesday night party to celebrate the completion of a lightweight self-improvement program, which involved a couple of dinner parties, a commitment to meditate three minutes per day and checking in with one's "buddy" to see if the month-long project we had committed to completing was on track. Mind you, failure is a good thing. But success stories will be featured on the blog, with a professional photographer hired for the shoot.

Featured projects can be anything from learning how to cook and catering a meal for friends to prototyping an app. Start to finish. One month. Hobbies have been launched into businesses so that people can become their dream selves full-time and for-profit. This can happen to anyone, so long as they stay within the present moment long enough to step into a future, alchemically polished version of their own skin.

The program is largely about time travel: working in the present but occupying the future until it becomes your real life. "What would you say to that old fearful self? What advice would you give?" (Future actualized self in dialogue with present self, who is inevitably being held back.)



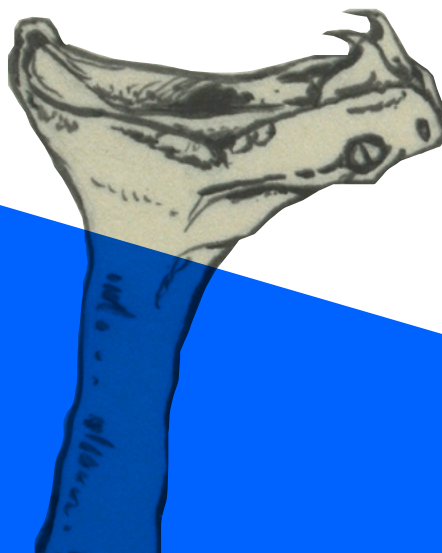
## 2

So what's holding us back? That tired old slog of personal history? Too much thinking, not enough self-love? Doubt?  
The fact that the human workforce will likely be replaced by computers within the century,  
powered by the personal data we give away for free?



All this assurance in the future self, regardless of actual preparation for or practice of the proposed task, raises two issues. First, it engages boldly with the Cartesian “cogito.” I believe that I am successful, and therefore I make money. This works best when participants can move from one financially solvent position to another, slightly more satisfying, position. There is a lot of talking *around* money at the party, but mostly in the terms of how much one *really* needs. If, for example, one wants to drive a Lamborghini for a week (this is half joking), being able to afford it isn’t necessary. The car can be borrowed from a friend who made it really big in the last bubble.

Secondly, belief in the future self is a magic show posing as education. Where is the transformation located and how does it do its work? Keeping track of history relies on two-way links. The user must be able to link to the information and *back* to where its sources exist. And back, and back. We know that our understanding of the sources will depend on our perspective and level of literacy (authorship, according to Nietzsche and Barthes), but, if we have no access to this genealogy, it will appear that wealth, agency and happiness are bestowed from above. The roots of privilege remain invisible: the All-Powerful Oz.





Art can generate two-way links. Like many artists I hope that, as Hal Foster states, art can be “dangerously political.” If “*Present Shock*,” as described by Douglas Rushkoff (an update of Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle*), is real and pervasive, we are already paralyzed before a series of spectacular screens that live feed events with no comprehensible means for response. If I were a modernist I would say that art provides a shock to the system, whether at the bodily network or sociopolitical. But because I don’t have faith in that heroic narrative, I think art is rebellious when it deals in two-way links.

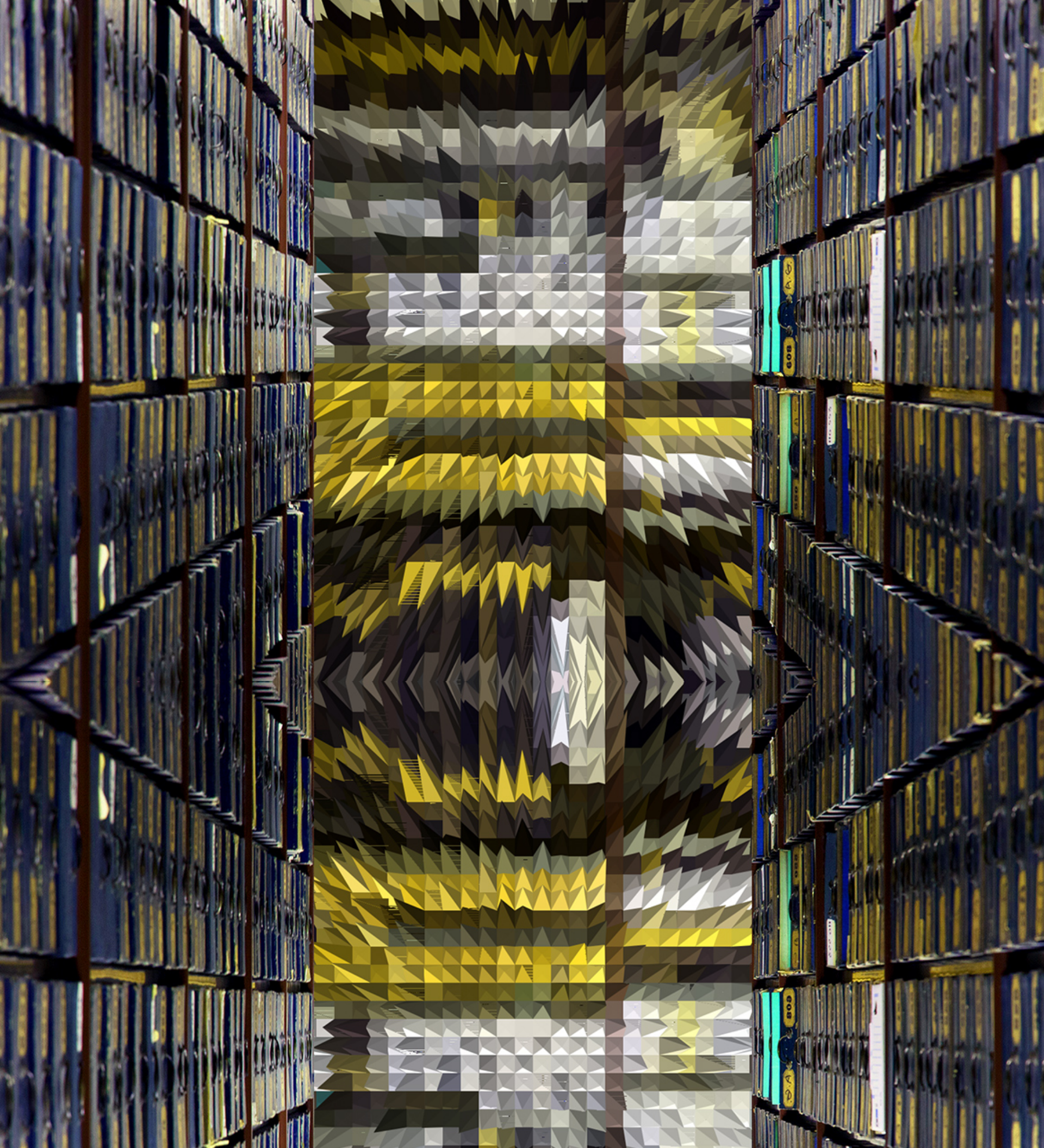
Perhaps even the consideration of history is disruptive. Not history in the sense of things that happened long in the past and are held at a distance from our conceptions of ourselves, but history as a set of active ingredients that pervade, constitute and circle around us.

### *Alexandra Hammond*

is a visual artist, writer and designer living in New York and San Francisco. A native Californian, her current work investigates constructions of the American West as they relate to the American Dream, labor, wealth, technology and spiritual enlightenment. Hammond’s interdisciplinary practice incorporates painting, performance and installation and draws from her experience working in the branding industry. She employs the vocabulary of the Vaudeville act, the advertising industry and the Natural History museum in her ongoing project, *Walliecamp*. Hammond is a student in the MFA Art Practice department at The School of Visual Arts, class of 2015.

[wallieblog.tumblr.com](http://wallieblog.tumblr.com)  
[artpractice.sva.edu](http://artpractice.sva.edu)







# On Archival Finding Aids

## *description, power and the need for shared authority*

### INTRODUCTORY MATERIALS SERIES KA01

The archive has held the title of neutral holder of evidentiary records since, arguably, the thirteenth century, when the institution was commonly referred to as *loci credibiles* or *places that give legal credibility to the documents kept*. This idea of the archive as a neutral holder of evidentiary records has been cemented for over seven centuries with the goals of objectivity and neutrality considered both achievable and realized. But within recent decades and since the advent of postmodernism, notions of archival practices rooted in objectivity have come under fire: archives are often described as societal constructions that are not neutral, but, on the contrary, influential, biased and powerful. Specifically, finding aids and archival descriptions are being questioned. Although a singular authoritative body and perspective produces the finding aid, it nevertheless holds the distinction of being neutral and objective. Only recently have archivists begun to challenge this paradoxical marriage between single authority and neutrality. Looking closer at finding aids and descriptive practices, it becomes clear that we need interactive and multi-authoritative online versions for their ability to democratize description practices, broaden contexts and promote archival advocacy.

Within the archival field, there is a refusal to acknowledge that archivists describing material act as *sources* (to extrapolate from communication theory). To consider the archivist a source would admit that archivists make decisions in the description process; it would underscore that archivists function as arbiters, and choose which message to send about the record they are describing—a

level of agency that many shirk. One needs to only refer to Muller, Feith and Fruin's *Dutch Manual* and Sir Hilary Jenkinson's *Manual of Archival Administration* to see this denial of power and influence. Both manuals thought neutrality could be achieved through the safeguarding of original order as set by the institution that created the record. Specifically, Jenkinson believed that the archivist's role was to *keep* records and archivists were to have no post-creation interference on archival material. Jenkinson believed that "truth" was revealed through archival documents and that the archivist was an unbiased "keeper" of records and a "selfless devotee to truth." This idea of archivist as truthful keeper became a common viewpoint and has only been thoroughly questioned by contemporary archivists. But clearly archivists did, and do, affect the archival process: an archivist can use any language within their description and highlight certain aspects of the material that they deem to be important. There are innumerable grammatical formulations, sentence structures, lengths and general means available when describing a record, and they decide on one singular message or description. The very assumption that objectivity can be achieved within this structure is problematic.

As noted by Wendy Duff and Verne Harris, the terrain of archival description is fraught with personal histories, institutional cultures, gender dynamics, class relations and other dimensions of meaning-construction. When describing records archivists will remember certain aspects and hide or forget others. Descriptions inevitably privilege some viewers, and they invariably reflect their creators.



Every representation and description is biased because it reflects a particular worldview and is constructed to meet specific purposes. Descriptions and archivists, against Jenkinsonian beliefs and those of previous eras, are very much biased and archivists are sources of information.

The problem lies in the purportedly natural, innocent and objective status of descriptions and categorizations. At surface level, descriptions and categorizations seem objective and we tend not to challenge them, but upon closer inspection, as noted by Jens-Erik Mai, all descriptions contain assumptions about the world, and have real consequences. Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star argue that, "Classifications that appear natural, eloquent, and homogenous within a given human context appear forced and heterogeneous outside that context." To understand basic assumptions hidden in classifications, we need to bring classifications out of their context.

## CASE STUDIES COLLECTION KA02

To follow Bowker and Star's suggestion, one need only look at archival materials created during the early half of the century dealing with marginalized groups. These groups are often portrayed within archival descriptions as objects of anthropology rather than living members of society, and are frequently given offensive descriptions and titles that reveal little knowledge of their history and culture. In analyzing the archival descriptions in the *Library and Archives Canada* (LAC) and *Library of Congress* of First Nations and Aboriginal groups, the obvious assumptions, biases and prejudices that seemed natural in their creation become blatantly obvious. When viewed under a contemporary lens, the descriptions' extremely forced nature becomes notable.

Improper description in archives does not solely result in poor naming; it also acts as improper representation of the past. Improper representation in archival institutions alters our perception and knowledge of the past and can potentially skew a societies' view of history, thereby altering social, cultural and collective memory. In extreme cases, bias archival description practices have led to the

creation of social groups and discrimination.

Gudmund Valderhaug highlights the use of archives in discrimination and writes about archives' potential for creating social groups through description. He uses the case of the Norwegian *war children* as an example. After World War II there were approximately 10,000 children with Norwegian mothers and German fathers in Norway. These children had no identifying qualities showing this mixed national percentage, which would have been superficially unknown to others. During World War II, Nazi officials registered children with German fathers within the Lebensborn records repository, and, after German surrender, the Norwegian authorities had access to these records and information, which recorded some 8,500 *war children* and their mothers. The accessioning of these records and the construction of their description within the Norwegian archives led to the creation of recognized category of the *war children*, and influenced their subsequent treatment. It was only through the appraisal, description and notation of records that individual *war children* could be identified, sought out and sanctioned. These children then received brutal treatment, and were stripped of their basic rights and citizenship.

Poorly described and intentionally mishandled records produced by Canadian residential schools are another example of power inherent within archival arrangement and description, and its effect on collective memory. The Canadian Government has a history of intentionally destroying and improperly describing records produced by Canadian residential schools that forcibly housed Aboriginal youth. Through the willing disregard and effacement of these records, and the Canadian population's unwillingness to seek and face these hard truths, the treatment aboriginal youth endured within these institutions was denied and unproven for decades. Recent analysis of documents released by British Columbia and Ontario surrounding residential schools by the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) are only now shedding light on the number of child fatalities in residential schools.

These poorly managed and described records, while improper, are viewed as legitimate and even official since



placed within an archive. Since official archives have, for centuries, been known as repositories of truthful and neutral records kept, and described, by an objective archivist, the representations they create are perceived as proper, and become engrained and inculcated within societies' collective memory. Description is powerful and has deep political effects—singular authority and limited perspectives during the process of description can enormously affect collective memory.

## HISTORICAL NOTES SERIES KA03

Neutrality and single authority have been cemented into the practice of archiving since its origin. Since the thirteenth century, finding aids and archival descriptions have been completed by singular archival authoritative sources for the purposes of cementing power, yet carried the title of neutral repository. As noted by French historian Jacques Le Goff, and reiterated by archivist and historian Terry Cook, since ancient times those in power decided who could speak and who was forced to be silent, both in public life and in archival records. The archive and its institutional origins in the ancient world is defined as a tool for legitimizing such power and for marginalizing those without power; finding aids and descriptions served as methods for displaying and describing this power.

With few exceptions from the thirteenth to eighteenth century, most archives were created by and for monarchs. From the Kingdom of Naples in the thirteenth century; the Duchy of Savoy in the fourteenth; France and the Tresor des Chartes in 1307; the archives of the Kingdom of Aragon in 1346; the Castilian Crown's *Archivo de Simancas* in the sixteenth century; and James I of England who appointed a *Keeper and Register of Papers and Records* to create an archive in the seventeenth century, archival repositories have a strong link to monarchs and were used as tools to legitimize authority. Overall, five centuries of archival practice were spurred by monarchs, and this period is now referred to as the time of the *Administrative Monarchs*. Even with the advent of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, singular authority was still very much present in archival practices. However, the authori-

ty shifted from the monarch to the archivists themselves. The Enlightenment, while increasing the accessibility of archives, ironically increased the uni-perspective descriptive traits of the archive.

Influenced by *the Encyclopedie*, post-Enlightenment archival arrangement aimed to facilitate historical studies, and historians were hired to arrange records. As stated by Ernest Posner in *Some Aspects of Archival Development* Since the French Revolution, these historians mostly arranged records according to their personal point of view rather than the record's peculiar character. For that reason special collections of *biographica*, *topographica*, *militaria*, *ecclesiastica*, and the like were created. The archivist, based on their perception of history, arranged and categorized information with no transparency, thought, or care about their partiality. Archivists had an unquestioned rule and authority over classification and description of records. The result was the subjective organization of records more reflective of the archivists' views than the records themselves and the organization that produced them.

The critique of single authority and suggestions to democratize archival description and appraisal practices emerged during the late 1980's from archival theorists such as Terry Cook, Valderhaug, Verne Harris and Kenneth Foote, who were influenced by the postmodern writings of Jacques Derrida and Michael Foucault. Authors such as Harris and Cook, in particular, focused on the end goal of description and asked for a critical and self-reflexive examination. To these postmodern archivists, archivists are always biased and are incapable of being impartial. With an understanding of their biases, archivists should seek out views that are counter to their own, which tend to be marginalized groups, minorities or sub-cultures.

Interestingly, Hans Booms and Valderhaug thought neutrality, or at least fair representation, was possible in the archival sciences and could be created through the democratization of appraisal and descriptive process. Both archivists asserted that society must define their own core values and these values would then be reflected, represented and mirrored through the archival record and description. Booms and Valderhaug argued that society itself is







the only qualified agent to lend legitimacy to archival appraisal and description. They concluded that, through societal definition and public control of public records, biases and defective record descriptions could be avoided. Their position was often dismissed for its theoretical underpinnings lack of clear applicability. While Booms and Valderhaug suggest that a public recordkeeping system is ideal, they also pose the question: "How could this eventually be done? Is the development of guidelines for democratic control of public recordkeeping a possible answer?" I would suggest that, with the advent of Web 2.0 and new online technologies, this once criticized theory could now be enacted.

#### NEW TECHNOLOGIES COLLECTION KA04

The advent of Web 2.0 and the creation of new online technologies have forced archivists to reconsider their understanding of finding aids. New technologies could potentially democratize the archival practice through shared authority, and thereby create a neutral description. As noted by Elizabeth Yakel, Web 2.0 is about connection, collaboration and community, and it is time to contemplate opening up archival representation and engaging researchers in these processes. The applicability of shared authority and distributed curation to archival representations has not yet been widely explored, but archivists are on the cusp of change. Web 2.0 represents a means to collaborate about the representation of history: what this history means, how it should be presented, how should it be described and what we know about it.

Archives and archivists need to begin using shared authority models in the creation of finding aids and general description. Authors like Yakel, Theimer, Palmer and Stevenson have stressed the importance of *collective intelligence* and peer produced finding aids for moral, practical and advocacy-based reasons. Morally, an interactive finding aid gives proper representation for those marginalized narratives that are misrepresented and embraces diversity, as noted by Townsend Baxter. Through the use of online technologies in the production of collective intelligence and shared authority we begin to see unprece-

dent interaction between archivists and clients, and proper representation of groups who have never had an authoritative voice in large institutional archives. Additionally, as noted by Samuel, archivists would engage openly with the client and respect their needs, rather than forcing them to accept professional meta-narratives of how records should be described. Samuel also argues that online interactive finding aids can provide richer, multi-relational, many-to-many contextual linkages as opposed to those finding aids of the past that were flat, mono-hierarchical and static. The product, then, is richer and more conducive to users' needs and wants through its willing intake and application of users' descriptions.

The idea of linkages also makes online finding aids more relevant and necessary as they broaden context. Archivists are well aware of the importance of creating context within finding aids, however, the context provided in the classic finding aid is relatively limited in comparison to interactive finding aids. In the virtual world, linking provides a means of both bringing in information to the finding aid and *linking out* to other contexts or sources. This ability to link to outside sources of information is new to archives, and has never been an option. Few archivists, though, have taken advantage of this linking tool in the creation of online databases and finding aids. Strangely, while many archivists are building online repositories and finding aids, very few are giving up control and using online tools to broaden context. Often online finding aids, as seen in the City of Toronto Archives digital database and the Library of Congress's online repository, are either in PDF form—therefore inalterable with no outsourcing—or in a basic web-based form with no means of linking to other sites. This reticence is disappointing, as linking to other sources of information greatly widens context and increases interaction with other institutions. As noted by Yakel, archivists linking primary and secondary sources in the context of a finding aid would be an interesting experiment. Additionally, mirroring the maxims of Brothman, Harris, Cook, and Joan Schwartz, the archives could link to opposing views and perspectives, or allow users to comment and add links that oppose the individual archivist's view. In a



field whose mantra is context, archivists must start broadening theirs, especially within digitized finding aids. Singular authorities, narrow contexts and unalterable finding aids represent a kind of colloquialism that is losing relevancy in a globalized society.

Furthermore, the practical benefits of shared authority in finding aids and descriptive practices are often overlooked. Peer production frees the archivist from the expectation that they must create the perfect finding aid. Rather, inline with Archives 2.0 maxims, archivists can post work in progress that they may not have the time or expertise to complete. The community, through peer production and review as offered by a wiki or blog comment section, can then help create descriptions and finish the work. Wikis and blogs are also ideal for the conversations they produce between users and their potential for creating dialogue. Therefore, peer produced finding aids not only democratizes the archive, but are also extremely practical for archivists and can help in the description of items that would otherwise be forgotten.

This need for collective intelligence, and production, is necessary for the archival profession. As Yakel notes in *Who Represents the Past? Archives, Records, and the Social Web*, we are facing changes in the relationship between records and researcher that leaves out archivists. Accepting online reference, education and exhibitions does as much to save archival practice and maintain its relevancy as it does to democratize the field and boost advocacy. Contemporary archivists are adopting user-centric approaches and employing contemporary technologies to meet user needs. As noted by Kate Theimer in *Archivists and Audiences: New Connections and Changing Roles in Archives 2.0*, archivists are also using user preferred models like blogs, wikis, comment sections and tags with the mission of serving researchers and not records through the creation of interactive means of reference and description. Archives are now looking at online means of reference to provide users with access to descriptive information in formats that are easy to understand and discover, thereby boosting advocacy and archival worth.

Interactive finding aids are necessary in the archival sciences for their ability to democratize the description

practice, broaden context and boost archival advocacy. Both the user and archival field benefit from online interactive finding aids and the shared authority they produce. Users benefit through their ability to share information and properly represent their perspectives and cultures; archivists benefit from a revitalized field and increased professional legitimacy.

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